



# Emily Pauline Johnson

*West wind, blow from your prairie nest. Blow from the mountains,  
blow from the west. The sail is idle, the sailor too;  
O! wind of the west, we wait for you. Blow, blow!  
I have wooed you so,  
But never a favour you bestow. You rock your cradle the hills be-  
tween,  
But scorn to notice my white lateen. I stow the sail, unship the mast:  
I wooed you long but my wooing's past;  
My paddle will lull you into rest. O! drowsy wind of the drowsy west,  
Sleep, sleep,  
By your mountain steep,  
Or down where the prairie grasses sweep!  
Now fold in slumber your laggard wings,  
For soft is the song my paddle sings.*

— “The Song My Paddle Sings”

## Quick Facts

- \* 1861-1913
- \* Canadian poet and actress
- \* Raised on the Six Nations Indian Reserve

## Biography

Emily Pauline Johnson was one of Canada's most well-known poets. Her poetry was supplemented by her ability as a performer. Pauline, as she was known, was born on March 10, 1861, near Brantford, Ontario. She was born and raised on the Six Nations Indian Reserve. Her father, George Johnson, was a Mohawk chief on the reserve. George married Emily Howells, a wealthy white woman who was originally from Bristol, England. Neither Emily's family nor George's approved of this marriage; and, even though George had worked and lived off the reserve for many years, the wealthier people of the area also found this marriage quite appalling. Nevertheless, George and Emily married and had four children: Henry, Allen, Eva, and, of course, Pauline.

This page was researched and submitted by Cristi L. Cota on 3/14/97.



# Emily Pauline Johnson

## Biography continued

Johnson grew up on the reserve in a mansion called Chiefswood that her father had built before her birth. She learned to canoe on the Grand River which flowed by her home. She thoroughly enjoyed her time canoeing and excelled at it. Many of her poems, including “The Song My Paddle Sings,” show the influence this activity had in her life. Johnson’s mother encouraged her to read many of the classic British novels, especially those by Romantic writers and Shakespeare. Johnson’s formal education was limited to the Brantford Model School and that of a governess. She, unlike her elder sister, was not afforded the opportunity to attend college. Even without a full formal education, Johnson was a very accomplished poet by the time she reached her late teens. Still, she had not yet had any of her work published.

In 1892, however, Johnson performed for the first time at the Young Liberals Club of Toronto. When she first told her mother that she wanted to be an actress, Johnson’s mother would not allow it. At the time, women who were actresses were thought to be improper and “loose.” Johnson instead decided to recite poetry, which was a very respectable activity for women of the day. Kasee reports, “the highlight of the evening was Johnson’s reading of her poem entitled ‘A Cry from an Indian Wife.’ . . . The coupling of Johnson’s message -- that Canada was still Indian land wrested unfairly from indigenous hands -- with the stunning drama of her recitation literally stole the show” (211). She continued to steal the show many more times while she toured many cities in Ontario. When performing, she wore two outfits. During the first part of the show, she wore an evening gown; but, for the second part of the show, she wore a dress that fit the nickname many people used for her: Mohawk Princess. Her “Mohawk Princess” dress was made from buckskin, Native metal work, rabbit pelts, a hunting knife, and a Huron scalp. The scalp had been given to her by her great-grandfather, Jacob Tekahionwake Johnson.

After performing throughout much of Eastern Canada, Johnson had saved enough money to fulfill a dream of hers: traveling to England. While in England, she met with many literary figures. She received many invitations to recite her poetry while in Europe because “of her warmth and attractive personality and . . . because of her Mohawk ancestry, which she highlighted in her work and in her appearance” (“Johnson, Emily Pauline” 399). In 1895, during her travels to England, Johnson’s first collection of poetry was published. *The White Wampum* includes one of her best-known poems, “The Song My Paddle Sings.”



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## Biography continued

Johnson returned to North America and continued touring both Canada and New England. She also continued to publish widely in magazines and journals in both the U.S. and Canada. Johnson wrote adventure stories about Indian life for boys' magazines and travel articles for newspapers, as well as, family stories for women's magazines and travel pieces for popular magazines like *Saturday Night*. She was able to write for a very diverse group of people and also wrote in many various types of literature, including short stories and journalism.

In 1905, Johnson's second book, *Canadian Born*, was published. In this book, she focused on the shared heritage of all Canadians, while "keeping the integrity of Native cultures and history central to her themes" (Kasee 211). About the time this book was published, Pauline also began to scale back the number of recitations she gave and the traveling she did. All of the stress of her previous touring began to wear on her health. She had wanted to retire in England, but there were not any journals or magazines that wanted to publish her work, as she found out during her second trip there. Instead, she retired to Vancouver in 1909. Her third book, *Legends of Vancouver*, published in 1911, was a narrative and interpretation of stories she had been told by Chief Joe Capilano. She had met Chief Joe, a member of the Squamish tribe of British Columbia, during her first trip to England, where she captured his attention by greeting him in his native tongue.

Johnson's fifth novel, *The Moccasin Maker*, focused on "the experiences of Canadian Indian and non-Indian women. Several of her heroines are mixed-bloods betrayed by their white lovers or husbands" (Brown Ruoff 317). Prior to this, Johnson knew that she had developed breast cancer and that surgery would not have helped. She was able, however, to continue to write throughout the last painful years of her life. Many of her fans wanted to show their appreciation to her. Many sent letters and also contributed to a fund that would support her. They subscribed to this fund by paying \$2 for her fourth book, *Flint and Feather*. At the time, \$2 was a tremendous amount of money. It is a credit to Pauline's writing and performance that she had this kind of following.



# Emily Pauline Johnson

## Biography continued

Emily Pauline Johnson died on March 7, 1913, just three days prior to her 52nd birthday. Throughout all of Canada, memorial services were held in her honor. A huge funeral was held in Vancouver, where they also kept the flags at half-mast the day she was buried. Her adopted home granted her wish of having her ashes interred at Stanley Park, a favorite place of hers in Vancouver. Her last book, *The Shagganappi*, was published after her death. Her work continued to sell very rapidly for several years. Later in the 1900s both *Legends of Vancouver* and *Flint and Feather* were reprinted. She was also honored by having a commemorative stamp which was released coinciding with the 100th anniversary of her birth. Today, Canadian schoolchildren continue to learn Pauline's most famous poems. She is also remembered by a large stone, which was placed over her grave in Vancouver by the Women's Canadian Club.

## Selected Bibliography

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